

CHAPTER 2.0 Historical Overview of Ladd Field

“The people were grand, the atmosphere was exciting, and the work was demanding and strict.”

– Marie Haggard⁶

In the 1930s, Alaska was essentially an enormous undefended region.⁷ Aside from Signal Corps stations, the Army had only one active installation in the entire Territory: the Chilkoot Barracks in Haines. No military airfields existed in Alaska at all.

Anthony J. Dimond, Alaska’s Territorial delegate to Congress, had been attempting to secure better defenses. At the same time, the Army Air Corps, the predecessor of today’s Air Force, was evaluating Alaskan defense needs. During the summer of 1934, then-Lt. Col. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold led a flight of ten B-10 bombers from the Washington, D.C. area to Alaska, scouting potential airfield sites and assessing Alaska’s defenses. Among other things, Arnold’s report recommended that the Air Corps should establish an air base at Fairbanks which could support cold weather testing and serve as a tactical supply depot. Military advisory boards and prominent officers also recommended action to establish air bases in Alaska. Testifying before Congress on this issue, Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell offered his now-famous words, “I believe in the future, he who holds Alaska will hold the world....”⁸

In 1935, Congress passed the Wilcox National Air Defense Act. This legislation authorized the construction of new airbases, including one in Alaska for cold weather testing and training. It did not provide funding. In spite of Delegate Dimond’s best efforts, Congress did not appropriate any construction money for four more years. With the tone of events in Europe and Asia, Dimond was not the only one to be concerned about that delay.

Still, some of the planning could move forward after the Wilcox Act passed. The Air Corps selected Fairbanks as the location for the cold weather test station because of its sub-arctic climate and because it had the basic infrastructure that would assist the builders: it had a rail link to the sea and an existing municipal airfield. In July and August 1936, Lt. Col. Wilmot A. Danielson led a site selection team that visited Fairbanks for a few weeks to search out sites for the proposed airfield. The team canvassed locations near the town that would offer the resources for what would essentially be the construction of a twin city. They sought an area with a good water supply and inquired about climate, timber supply, geology and permafrost, habitation fog, and utility systems.⁹ The group departed without announcing the airfield’s location, but a few months later, in March 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt withdrew nearly six square miles of public domain land east of Fairbanks in Executive Order 7596. The chosen area

⁶ Interview, Marie Haggard, Fairbanks, AK, 30 July 2002.

⁷ Although there had been earlier military activity in Alaska, including reconnaissance expeditions and the establishment of interior outposts under the command of Ft. Seward (later renamed Chilkoot Barracks) in Haines, that activity had diminished significantly by the 1930s.

⁸ Quoted in Cloe, *Top Cover*, 21.

⁹ “Air Chiefs at All-Alaska Dinner,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 29 July 1936, 1, 5. “Air Base Staff is Completed and All Now Hard at Work,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 31 July 1936, 1. “Army Board Leaves Here Next Week,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 15 August 1936, 1. “Air Base Site Within 10 Miles,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 17 August 1936, 1.



Figure 2. Maj. Ladd. In December 1940, the new airfield was named in honor of Maj. Arthur K. Ladd, an Air Corps pilot who had been killed in a South Carolina air crash. Courtesy Alaskan Air Command History Office, Elmendorf AFB.

lay along the Chena River, extending one to three miles upstream of town. In later years, the airfield would expand and encompass more of the surrounding land.

Preliminary construction finally began late in August 1939 with surveys, road work and site clearing. Within days, World War II started in Europe when Germany invaded Poland. Despite the new urgency of the situation, construction at Ladd could not get underway in earnest until the spring of 1940 when shipments of material arrived. Gen. “Hap” Arnold was now the Chief of the Army Air Corps, and that summer he ordered the air station to go into operation a year ahead of schedule. In September 1940, although the runway was the only permanent facility which was completed, ceremonies marked the dedication of the airfield. Ladd Field was in business, if just barely.

During its first two years of operation, Ladd Field was strictly a cold weather test station. The first winter, Ladd was staffed with an Air Corps detachment and with a company of ground troops from the 4th Infantry who provided airfield security. Maj. Dale V. Gaffney was the station commander. By the time the second testing season approached, a coast artillery unit had also arrived to provide anti-aircraft defense. Small detachments of engineers, quartermaster corps, signal, ordnance, and medical staff rounded out the personnel at the field.¹⁰

Gen. Arnold’s Firsthand View

During the summer of 1940, General Arnold visited the Alaskan installations and described his visit to the nation in an article in the *National Geographic* magazine. In the face of war in Europe, Arnold acknowledged that the U.S. military had “no aviation experience in the Arctic” but that the construction of airbases near Fairbanks and Anchorage was providing valuable lessons in engineering and would secure the air frontier of the north. It would be a challenging prospect. “We had spent only a few hours in Alaska before it was evident that it is one thing to decide that national defense requires air bases up near the Arctic Circle... and quite another to accomplish these results.”

Maj. Gen. H. H. Arnold,
“Our Air Frontier in Alaska,”
National Geographic,
October 1940, 487.

The first winter, testing took place under primitive conditions. According to one writer, the mechanics worked on the airplanes “in raw wind and incredible temperatures on naked runways.”¹¹ That may not have been much of an exaggeration. The permanent buildings, including the hangar and its maintenance shops, were not yet ready. Aircraft mechanics used temporary shelters for their work. The Army Airways Communication System (AACS) spent part of the winter operating its radio equipment from a lean-to on a log cabin garage measuring only 12 feet by 15 feet. Its men considered that an improvement over their original assignment to an unfinished building, which could not yet provide the proper electrical current for their equipment.¹²

Cold weather testing focused primarily on aircraft performance and maintenance. Its major goals were to develop standard procedures for servicing and operating aircraft in subzero temperatures and to test all kinds of aircraft parts from engine components to armament, tires, heaters and fluids. The testing program also investigated other important aspects of

¹⁰ “Report of Operations...,” 86. Letter, Lt. Col. Dale V. Gaffney to Lt. Col. Earl S. Hoag, 23 September 1941, copy at Elmendorf AFB Office of History, “Cold Weather Operations at Ladd Field.”

¹¹ Capt. Richard L. Neuberger, “Wing Commander,” *Alaska Life*, May 1944, 43.

¹² “Report of Operations...,” 71. Re nose hangars, p. 86.



Wake Up, There's a War On!

Word of the Pearl Harbor attack came to Lt. Col. Gaffney from commercial radio engineer Augie Hiebert, who had picked up the news on short wave stations early in the morning of December 7th.

"I was the first to hear about it, and I had to call up the commander of Ladd Air Force Base and tell him about it. Got him out of bed one Sunday morning....

"I listened to KGEI, the GE, General Electric short wave station in San Francisco. They were transmitting all about the fact that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, was being bombed right then. I turned across amateur bands and they were alive with reports coming from Pearl Harbor that Honolulu was being attacked. And that's how I heard it. I knew that the military had a very uncertain short wave system if any at all. So I called up Col. Gaffney, who was the Military Commander here. He was a sort of a party guy; he had been up the night before. I got him out of bed and I asked him, 'did you know there was a war on, Dale?' And he said, 'no,' he said, 'you've got to be kidding.' And I said, 'come on out, I've got a recording of it.' So he came out, he put the town on military alert right away. We went black that same night. And he got on the air then and told people what to do or what not to do, and that's the way it got started. He called up Gen. Buckner's office down in Ft. Richardson. The Army in Ft. Richardson, which was the headquarters of the Alaska Defense Command, hadn't heard about it for two hours. We just were out of touch when it came to communications in those days."

arctic operations such as clothing, communications equipment, survival gear, medical issues, and ground support.

Shortly after the second winter of testing got underway, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, drawing the United States into World War II. After an initial disruption following the attack, cold weather testing continued through the end of the season. However, events in 1942 changed the operations and character of Ladd Field for the duration of the war.

Only a few months later in June 1942, Japanese forces bombed Dutch Harbor and occupied the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska. Ladd's Cold Weather Test Detachment was deactivated and its men sent to assist defense efforts in Nome and the Aleutians. Ladd Field temporarily came under the control of the 11th Air Force, part of the Alaska Defense Command headquartered at Ft. Richardson outside of Anchorage.¹³ Until this time, Ladd had been considered an "exempted station" devoted to research, not combat, whose commander reported directly to the headquarters of the Army Air Forces.

By early fall of 1942, the Cold Weather Test Detachment was reactivated. Ladd Field once again became an exempted research station reporting to the AAF headquarters.¹⁴ The Alaska Defense Command retained the responsibility for Ladd's air and ground defense and all non-technical service and supply. At the same time, a new Lend-Lease mission was starting to operate at the field (see chapter 5). Under Lend-Lease agreements, the United States provided warplanes and materiel to the Soviet Union to use against Nazi Germany. Ladd Field was selected as the transfer point for Lend-Lease aircraft transiting the Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) route. More than 7,900 aircraft were eventually delivered to Soviet representatives at Ladd Field. Soviet pilots then ferried these planes to Nome and across Siberia to the eastern war front. Lend-Lease deliveries and support

functions soon overtook all others at the field. Within a year Ladd would change hands again to facilitate this new mission.

The Lend-Lease program required considerably more infrastructure and personnel than the original cold weather testing activities for which Ladd Field

¹³ Gen. Simon B. Buckner commanded forces of the Army and the Army Air Corps in Alaska as part of the Alaskan Defense Command. He reported to Gen. John L. DeWitt, who headed the IX Corps, later the Western Defense Command. Maj. (later Col.) Everett S. Davis was the chief of aviation of the Alaskan Defense Command under Buckner. Cloe 30, 36.

¹⁴ Memo, Adjutant General, 25 October 1942, "Status of Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska". Elmendorf AFB History Office, Cold Weather Operations at Ladd Field file.



Gaffney's Field



Brig. Gen. Dale V. Gaffney's career was closely tied to the development of Ladd Field. Arriving with the first survey crews, Gaffney saw the airfield grow from a small test station in 1939

into a large Cold War air defense base ten years later. Ladd's growth paralleled his own rise in rank from Major to Brig. General. Known to some as the "Screaming Eagle of the Yukon," Gaffney served as the commander of Cold Weather Test Detachment and Ladd Field for most of the period between 1940 and 1943. He then became the commander of the Air Transport Command's Alaskan Wing from 1943 until the end of the war, corresponding to the time that the ATC controlled Ladd Field. Gaffney returned to Ladd AFB in 1948 as base commander. He died in 1950. According to Capt. Clyde Sherman, Gaffney was a "fine fellow to work with; he would talk to you, and he didn't think he knew it all about this country."

Figure 3. Brig. Gen. Dale V. Gaffney. Kay Kennedy Aviation collection, # 91-098-856, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

had originally been designed. It was necessary to house Russian representatives, mechanics, translators, and transient crews. A large supply and repair depot was needed on-site to ensure that all aircraft met the specifications of the agreements when they were transferred to the Russians. The original permanent garrison mushroomed as hundreds of temporary buildings were erected and a new runway and hangars were constructed.

On October 1, 1943, Ladd Field was transferred to the Air Transport Command (ATC) and remained under its control for the remainder of the war. The Cold Weather Test Detachment continued its work and expanded its efforts, reporting to the military research agencies as a tenant unit at Ladd. A large civilian staff assisted the many support units at Ladd during the peak years. In August 1944, at least 1,750 civilians were working at Ladd, engaged in construction and engineering, base operations, quartermaster support, and other areas. At around the same time, 2,000 enlisted men and 155 officers served in the ATC, and an additional 1,300 enlisted men and 113 officers served in other units. By June of 1945, the base was able to garrison 4,555 troops and officers.¹⁵

When the war ended in 1945, military personnel rapidly left Ladd Field for stateside installations and subsequent discharge from the service. In November, Ladd Field was transferred from the ATC to the 11th Air Force, also known as the Alaskan Air Command. Activity at the base diminished, although cold weather testing continued on a reduced basis during the demobilization and beyond.

It was not long before world events created a new role for Ladd to play in the developing stand-off between the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1947, Ladd Field was renamed Ladd Air Force Base. It hosted strategic reconnaissance, air defense, and research missions in the early years of the Cold War and was the northern sector command headquarters for air defense. To accomplish those missions, many World War II buildings were removed and new construction changed the face of the installation. At the end of the 1950s, the Air Force moved its remaining operations to Eielson and Elmendorf AFBs, and in 1961, the Army took over Ladd. Renamed Fort Jonathan Wainwright, the post has now served Army needs for four decades.

¹⁵ Figures from: Monthly Historical Reports, Station #3 ATC, May 1944, and 1466th AAF Base Unit, August 1944, microfilm AO177, Elmendorf AFB History Office. "Alaska Military Construction," in Summary of Field Progress reports, Corps of Engineers, Seattle District June 1945, in UAA Archives, Alaskan Air Command collection, series III f 23.

Ladd Field's Phases of Activity, 1940-1947.

Initial Operations as Cold Weather Experiment Station 1940-1942	<i>Ladd Field dedicated Sept. 1940</i>	<i>Exempted Air Corps cold weather research station</i>	
Wartime Transformation 1942	<i>Lend-Lease transfers begin Sept. 1942</i>	<i>CWTD disbanded, re- established.</i>	<i>Air Depot functions gain importance</i>
Standardizing the Wartime Operations 1943-1945	<i>ATC takes over Ladd, October 1943</i>	<i>CWTD continues as tenant organization</i>	
Demobilization and Transition to Cold War Air Base 1945-1947	<i>Lend-Lease ends Sept. 1945</i>	<i>Ladd transferred to 11th Air Force, 1945</i>	



